

Beira Railway Station: Modern Architecture as an urban catalyst

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Abstract. Situated on the Indian Ocean coast, the city of Beira was, throughout the last century, a vital outlet for the inland African British-controlled territories. Inaugurated in 1966, the Beira Central Station was intended as a mark of Portuguese Colonial Africa modernity. After independence in 1975, the building's significance and importance for the city has persisted until today. In recent decades, however, due to economic decline and natural disasters, both the station and the city have suffered severe deterioration. But the cultural and symbolic significance of the building is also undeniably on the urban scale, and the railway station may become a critical factor in Beira's urban centre regeneration, furthermore performing an important social role. This paper aims to argue the importance of exploring the functional program as well as a participatory process in the rehabilitation methodology, thus reinforcing the potential of an iconic building of the Modern Movement as a catalyst for urban renewal and social cohesion of the city of Beira.

1. SITUATE, CONTEXTUALIZE

Inaugurated in 1966, and designed by Paulo de Melo Sampaio, Francisco José de Castro and João Garizo do Carmo, the Beira Central Station is a grand building that was conceived as a symbol of modernity developed in Portuguese Colonial Africa. The recognition of the building's economic and social importance for the city persisted after independence in 1975. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, both the station and the city have suffered severe damage due to serious problems associated with the civil war that has devastated the country, the economic debility and the lack of maintenance, which the recent cyclone Idai has tragically accentuated.

Nowadays, as a result of declining railway freight traffic, the central station is clearly underused, and its physical condition has noticeably deteriorated, despite the evident care CFM has placed in safeguarding the building. Its exceptional architectural quality and the urgency to interrupt this cycle of progressive decay were recognised in 2019 by the Getty Foundation. The Keeping it Modern programme awarded a grant for the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan for the Beira Central Station (BCS).



Figure 1.

2. RESEARCH: SEE AND HEAR, QUESTION, RELATE, CONFRONT, IMAGINE, ELABORATE A COMPLEX THOUGHT

We believe that rehabilitating a building only attains its full meaning if it reverberates beyond its strict physical circumstance and contributes to the urban quality and socio-economic cohesion of its environment. The premise of this view is to overcome a technocratic and reductionist understanding of rehabilitation, and to defend its complete significance. This is to say, it implies a critical interpretation of the context of the object under study through the research of its material and immaterial history, and to envision a desired (although plausible) future for it, construing the complex thought that will conduct the rehabilitation project. The Burra Charter (2013) and the concept of Baukultur (2018) are essential references in steering this process.

Since we acknowledge that the solutions are encrypted in the interrogations that arise with progressive rigor throughout the research process, questioning it is basilar in this type of approach. Thus, accompanying the

architectural survey, some topics emerged as essential to be debated: What does Beira Central Station physically, culturally and symbolically represent? How to transcend its immediate functional dimension? What socio-economic role, what urban representations does it want to fulfil? At which multiple scales can it perform? What uses can it have? And - underlying - what level of compatibility with these hypothetical uses will its architectural integrity support?

3. CRITICAL READING: TO INTERPRET, TO QUESTION, TO DEBATE, TO DESIGN THE FUTURE

3.1 At the time when the Beira Central Station was projected and built (1958–1966), the Portuguese colonial state was still experiencing a moment of confidence in the future of the Portuguese Overseas. Confirming it, there was a strong commitment by the regime to demonstrate its vitality, which resulted namely in the accelerated construction of large-scale infrastructure.

Although the Mozambican War of Independence broke out in 1964, the policies implemented by the Portuguese government aimed at developing the economy of the overseas provinces enabled economic growth that resulted in an expressive building movement both private and public. In this period, architectural production grew significantly and stamped the urban fabric through remarkable buildings, projecting an image of strength that the colonial regime wanted to promote in the face of international crescent criticism. Communication infrastructures – sea ports, railways, airways – were one of the main sectors covered by this developmental policy.

This conjuncture proved to be quite conducive to the assertion of the architectural modernity of these territories. Over there, there was greater freedom of expression in official architecture than in the ‘metropolis’, where it was more strictly controlled by the fascist regime. Thus, the affirmation of the Modern Movement achieved, on par with the declaration of contemporaneity to which it is intrinsic, contours of an opposite sign of political expression.

3.2. The history of Beira – the second largest town in Mozambique until recently - has since its early days been deeply connected to the concerted history of railway and sea port development in Mozambique.

Its establishment along the Indian Ocean in 1887 was dictated by geostrategic considerations aimed at dominating commercial access to the African hinterland. Representing the most interesting gateway to the sea from that territorial strip, in particular, from Zimbabwe and Malawi (formerly Rhodesia and Nyasaland), Beira transformed into the outlet for the inland African British-controlled territories. The railway line was inaugurated in 1894 and traffic on the Sena line (an essential line for the flow of coal) that

links Malawi and Moatize to Beira opened in 1922. The first mooring berth, to complement this railway line, was built at the end of the decade.

The growth of the city was evident. An urban plan was designed to control it (José Porto e Ribeiro Alegre, 1943) and from then on, the expansion of Beira was based on a modernist matrix. From the mid-1950s a new wave of development begins, on par with a calling as a summer resort that colonial settlers from neighbouring British territories imprinted with a definite cosmopolitan flavour.

It is in this context of social and economic dynamism that a young generation of talented architects and engineers recently arrived from Portugal found an opportunity to realise projects that reflected their link to the principles of the Modern Movement. That is how in the mid-20th Century an exceptional number of buildings affiliated with the Modern Movement were built, covering very different uses, scales and typologies and giving Beira a distinct modern atmosphere. Amongst a multiplicity of remarkable buildings, the railway station, inaugurated in 1966, stands out.

3.3 The Beira Central Station is a structure of great relevance in the Modern Movement panorama, and it is possible to find several publications that refer to the building. However, those studies focus mainly on its architectural attributes, where themes related to its current and future urban role in the city of Beira has yet to be explored.

The station consists of three main pieces, designed simultaneously by different architects: the pier area, attributed to Garizo do Carmo, includes an extensive logistical structure with 1400m² where the warehouses, employee offices and waiting rooms are located; a parallelepiped volume, by Melo Sampaio (with a 81,4x14,5m rectangular base and 7 floors above ground level, a total of 8260m²), where the offices of CFM, State bodies and private offices are located; and, by Francisco José de Castro, the parabolic nave of the entrance that, along with the ground floor of offices' volume is about 1900m², and houses the grand public atrium, access and vertical connections to the upper floors, as well as several station and public services (ticket offices, restaurants, toilets, etc).

It should be noted that about 1/3 of the offices are not assigned to the railway. According to a recent local survey, a spatial reorganisation could free up more space, attracting other uses and different public and activities.



Figure 2.

Despite all this spatial display, the urban movement the station generates is limited to its workers and to very little railway traffic, which is mostly dedicated to the transport of goods. Although undeniable as an icon, the presence of Beira Central Station in the city remains well behind what it could represent in both urban daily life and cultural activity. This circumstance is explicitly reflected in its frontal square, which has never attained the intense public life that such infrastructure usually implies.

In fact, the building appears as a body inserted in an unresolved urban fragment, away from city life. But in favour of the reversal of this situation, the station is located very close to the old and traditional centre of the city, the *Baixa*, also marked by multiple buildings of Modern character. Within a 1000m radius commercial and service areas (shops and banks, hotels, etc.) are well established, as are the main administrative facilities (Municipal Council and Court House) and some of the most significant urban plazas. In addition, important cultural facilities like the *Casa do Artista* are also situated nearby.

On the other hand, the proximity of the station to the Chiveve River - considered as the heart and lungs of the city -, where the construction of an extensive urban park that will cross the city is currently underway, must be taken into account. Framed by the Cities and Climate Changes Project and linked to environmental issues (such as the conservation of the ecosystem and flood control), in addition to educational and recreational purposes, this park will receive a set of collective equipment to complement the existing ones, namely, the public pools and the *Casa dos Bicos*, two noteworthy modern buildings. And it will certainly also be interesting to relate these facilities to the nearby sports complex owned by CFM (another modern and remarkable piece, recently restored), thus contributing to the expansion of the urban equipment net of the neighbourhood.

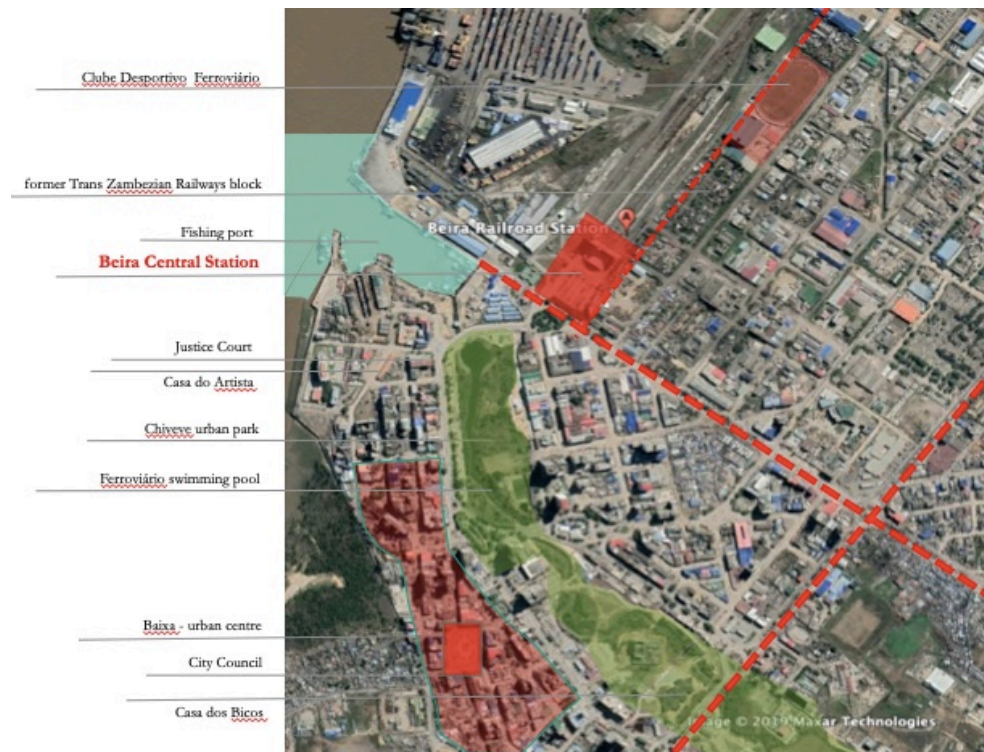


Figure 3.

The station's proximity to the Pungué River must not be ignored either. Whereas the cargo port will always have conditioned access, the area where the fishing dock is currently located, at the top of Chiveve Park, 200m from the station, can be envisioned as an instance of urban contact with the river itself. In the medium term, perhaps the city can find an interesting opening point on the water here, favouring the urban enjoyment of the riverfront.

Additionally, it would be necessary that the urban approach to this area contemplate the renovation of the shantytown that has since settled in the contiguous former block of CFM workers, a very interesting example of wood and metal housing design. An inclusive approach, not gentrifying, that could provide residents with decent living conditions, and function as a cutting-edge laboratory for the social integration of the vast sections of poor people in the city.



Figure 4.

3.4 All of the hypotheses that could be related and rooted in the rehabilitation of the BCS will, however, have to be considered in the urban planning of Beira. As it turns out, the plan of 1943 integrated the station in the urban composition that coherently extended to it and framed it into a formal urban square. Despite the great strength of the 50s and 60s, the city's development never managed to accomplish the urban fabric defined in the plan. And the area of the station remained incomplete, an unfulfilled design to this day.

This failure could, however, open previously unsuspected possibilities to the contemporary urban planning. But, actually, most recent plans (1999 and 2013) neither include the railway nor the station in the broader project of the city beyond the condition of a cargo terminal connected to the sea port. According to those plans, the BCS will remain enclosed in its space-functional stronghold, without an urban reflection.

From the perspective of rehabilitation advocated here, it will then be necessary for CFM to take on the role of an actor involved in the socio-economic development of the city. This is why it is essential to value the rethinking of the functional programme at par with research surrounding the material condition of the building and the technical solutions for its rehabilitation. Especially, in circumstances of this nature, where an enlarged complicity is required, the involvement of the political

administration, as well as other urban agents and local communities will also be essential.

In the case of BCS, there are some pressing questions: will it be interesting to install general public services open to the public? Renting office space to private individuals? Are building architectural features favourable to the provision of services to the community?

One wonders, especially, if the railway will expand its scope, including in its objectives the transportation of passengers, nowadays largely reduced. In fact, this possibility – which none of the existing urban plans bring forth – is structuring and would not only renew the building's use, but would also contribute to reorganising the deficient local public transport system. In this vision of the future, the station along with its surrounding land could possibly be home to Beira's intermodal centre for rail, land and river transportation. If adopted, such a solution would obviously have a high impact on the functional and civic rehabilitation of the BCS and its surrounding area.

The building's rehabilitation itself could be a motto for local education and economic development: giving special attention to the training of labour workers in the various arts in the construction and restoration sector; reactivating the manufacturing of construction elements, such as *brise-soleil* and aluminium frames, whose factories are still in operation; and, namely, promoting studies on the ceramic tiles used, tending to their restoration. As a landmark of the city, the Station could furthermore open for public visits, strengthening itself as an element of the city's identity and thus contribute to the public recognition of Beira's wide architectural heritage.

4. TECHNIQUE AND ETHICS: MAKING ARCHITECTURE, QUALITY, SUSTAINABILITY, HISTORY AND CHANGE COMPATIBLE

Programmes for collective use are believed to be essential components to the conservation of cultural assets. It is through this use that the value and appropriation of heritage by the community is socially asserted and, consequently, its social and political interest, which is indispensable for obtaining the resources necessary for its maintenance.

Thus, the Programming Phase will be a central moment to the rehabilitation strategy because it will reconcile uses and functions with the physical and patrimonial support that the station offers, valuing it. This methodology means taking on a participatory and co-responsible process that should consider the CFM, as the owner, the community and political and economic stakeholders; it also means that architectural hierarchies will need to be defined, establishing principles that safeguard the tectonic integrity of the building. The search for solutions that are attentive to the environmental and financial sustainability of the building must also be considered

otherwise, the intervention may not contribute to the effective and sustainable revitalisation of the building.

Facing current needs as potentialities for a future that will unfold at different times and understanding the building as a complex urban infrastructure, even as an instrument of socio-cultural and urban development, the adoption of a comprehensive strategy that induces scaling effects and amplifies results is proposed in this prime phase of rehabilitation. This process includes several simultaneous approaches:

- the rigorous study of the building in its historical, architectonic, artistic and functional components, contributing to the debate of cultural assimilation of buildings over time, acutely sensitive in the post-colonial context;
- the integration of the station in the city's urban strategy;
- the involvement of the local political administration and of the community in the process, aimed at a broad social consensus;
- the elaboration of a functional programme that incorporates valences that are revitalising for the building and urbanistically significant;
- the design of an architectural programme that ensures compatibility between the envisaged uses and the architectural value of the building;
- the consideration of the building as a potential research laboratory for the knowledge of modern architecture and the training of labour in rehabilitation and restoration.

Since a strong commitment to the community, the functional reprogramming that will accompany the building's rehabilitation design can add decisively to the improvement of the urban and environmental conditions of the whole area, furthermore performing an important social role. Assuming its complexity and contradiction, the project should consider the multi-layered scales and contexts that can favour and polarize an urban centrality, too fragile today.

It is believed that by adopting this methodology in its rehabilitation, the Beira Railway Station can be achieved as an urban catalyst in Beira's urban development, contributing to the ethic planning of our future cityscape, while preserving the legacy of the MoMo.

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IMAGE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Paulo de Melo Sampaio, Francisco José de Castro, João Garizo do Carmo, Beira Central Station (1958-1966), Beira, Mozambique (©MMO2019); Beira city flag logo

Figure 2. View of the city from Beira Central Station (©MMO2019)

Figure 3. Beira aerial view of the Station neighbourhood (source: Google Earth, 2019; edited MMO2020)

Figure 4. Children who live in the vicinity of the station (©MMO2019)

BIOGRAPHY

Maria Manuel Oliveira completed her Architecture degree at School of Fine Arts of Porto (1985). She is a researcher at the Landscapes Laboratory, Heritage and Territory, and since 1997, a lecturer at the School of Architecture at the University of Minho, where she has been teaching and conducting work on architectural and urban design at the School's Studies Centre. Her present interests centre on research into deteriorated buildings and vacant lands in town context and which are critical for the urban collective memory. She is currently involved in research projects related to these themes in East African countries.